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The adventure of dialogue



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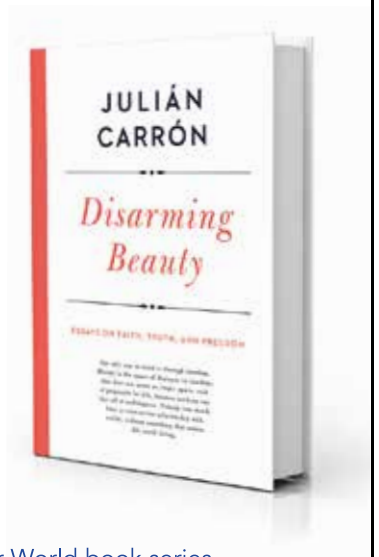
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"These are people I want to be with"

JULIÁN CARRÓN

Disarming Beauty

ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM



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Resuming the dialogue

Do we truly believe that the other is “a good for me”? Do we actually recognize this in our daily experience? When we say it again here, repeating a line that our readers have seen often in this magazine, we do not do so in order to articulate sociological theories or to urge readers to a moral effort, a misunderstood “let’s love each other.” We do so to help each other look at our experience and judge whether it is true or not that unless I compare ideas with others, I will never be able to grow, to gain awareness of who I am, and put to the test what I think. Without you, I would not be myself. Is this true or not? Mark you, this does not just concern those “far away.” The *other* is anyone, even someone close, maybe in tune with my ideas, maybe part of my personal story for years—a friend, a child, a husband or wife—but in any case irreducibly *other* than me. Those people have the same basic features as those I come upon for the first time: they are not made in my image and likeness as I would like or as I have in mind. They are given to me.

For this reason, it is essential to resume dialogue. This is certainly the case in a world in which erecting fences between people and nations has become a common shortcut for escaping from many fears. But it is even more so if we look at our day in, day out existence, at our lives. As always, the best way to understand this is to *look*, to go and see where this strange “relationship with the ‘other,’ whoever and however he or she may be,” essential “for my existence to develop, for my vigor and life,” as Fr. Giussani said, buds and blossoms. Go and see, because dialogue is a real relationship, not an idea; it is an experience, not a theory, and it happens where you least expect it.

On December 26th, in the historic library of Alexandria, Egypt, the thousand-year-old heart of Islamic culture, dialogue as a real relationship happened at the presentation of the Arabic translation of *Disarming Beauty*, a book by Julián Carrón, the leader of CL. The event was perhaps little noted because of the Christmas holidays, but it is worthwhile to draw attention to it now, not only because of the event itself (which was impressive: that a book on the Christian proposal written by a Catholic priest should find a wide-open door in the Muslim world is not at all something to be taken for granted), but because of the method it indicates: dialogue, an encounter among people, a friendship that enables reason to broaden and opens spaces of freedom and reciprocal enrichment in places where this might seem impossible.

The wager is that what happened there, as in the other stories recounted in this issue of *Traces*, will help us come to grips with the reality around us, enabling us to glimpse a possible road right where we are, in our relationships with all the *others* who populate our life, because we need this more than ever.

Letters

**Said, Gabriele,
Bianca, Gianandrea**

edited by
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“I want to eat with you”

I didn't expect nor could I have imagined that what I met more than 28 years ago would still be alive in me today and having such a big impact on my life. I met Communion and Liberation in Muggiò where I was living, but I didn't think that this encounter would have lasted until today, nor that one day the person leading the Movement would come to my city—Alexandria in Egypt—to present a book about the crux of faith and the discovery of beauty and the presence of God in our lives (see article on p. 6). I said to myself, “Distances, cultures, and languages are no longer so far apart and certainly are not an obstacle to the spreading of the beauty and love of Jesus Christ.” I observe that the word of Jesus has become true in front of my eyes and hence He is alive among us. Jesus sent his disciples to all parts of the world to spread His love among all peoples. That day in the library of Alexandria, during the presentation of the book, it seemed to me that Jesus had sent his disciples to help reveal beauty to all who were there. I saw that love penetrates the human heart and overcomes every kind of obstacle. Discovering the reason for being and having a full awareness of reality responds directly to human curiosity. That day, the library of Alexandria was a living Church. At the end, Fr. Carrón said to us, “I want to eat with you.” It was as if he were telling us that he is our brother, that he doesn't want to leave us alone, and that he desires to share our journey with us—a journey of love toward our neighbor characterized by the beauty we have encountered.

Said, Alexandria Egypt

Like a dormant volcano

Dear Fr. Carrón, I've had my first experience as a substitute teacher in a middle school, serving as an instructional assistant for a young autistic boy. They told me that “he doesn't understand anything: it's like banging your head against a wall.” Certainly, it wasn't easy to begin this journey, but I started by opening myself up with a myriad of attempts. I saw his difficulties, and there were some failures, but also many successes that revealed his potential (and he has a lot). I was moved by how good he was in geography and at using the computer. So, using that as a starting point, I tackled French (an enormous obstacle for him, a native English speaker who makes quite a confusion of Italian) by starting from geography. Looking at a photo of the Champs Élysées on the computer, he said to me, “Do you know who those people are?” It was a group of fans from the World Cup under the Arc de Triomphe. He insisted that “they are the yellow vests.” How amazing to see that even about the topics of politics and ecology, he knew everything! He is a dormant volcano, but if you can awaken him, he reveals so many interests and so much knowledge, more than the majority of his classmates. My colleagues have seen him reborn. They have even changed the schedule so that I could remain with him for the rest of the year. One teacher in particular asked me many questions about my life. She wanted to find something in my curriculum vitae that could explain the relationship I had with him. She said to me, “Did you notice how he was looking at you during your explanation? He wasn't distracted for an instant. In three years, I have never seen him this way.” I hadn't noticed, but I was moved to see that finally even my colleagues had begun to look at him. What I recognize is that I hadn't looked for support in external strategies but that everything is born from the contagious hope we have inside of us and that when others grab onto it, awareness blossoms in me again.

Gabriele, Italy

“Who could love me when I’m this way?”

One evening during the GS vacation, some friends proposed to us a beautiful program of film, videos, and songs. Among the various texts was a phrase from Fr. Julián Carrón that a few months earlier had struck me like a thunderbolt: “The fact that you’re embarrassed by yourself shows that you exist and if you exist, it means that you are loved. In becoming aware of this, you learn to love yourself.” To find these words again was unbelievable. Until a few months ago, I was down on myself about everything, even the smallest things, because I didn’t like myself. I did not love myself the way I am. I have a physical defect—I’m missing a hand—and I’ve always wondered who could love me when I’m this way. In fact, I’ve always had a hard time making new friends. I often spent the summer at home alone with this question that ate away at me. One day, my friend Rosa wanted to come over to see me but I told her no. She insisted that I not be alone but I didn’t want her to come. So, she said to me, “At least ask, go to Mass. It always works for me.” I began to do that and even though it seemed strange to me, I began to ask to be free even without a hand. Little by little, things began to change. In September at the GS Equipe, I was no longer deterred; I hung out with whoever was around, I met new people. I was free; I was living the freedom I had asked for, but without being aware of it. It was there that Fr. Carrón said those words. In hearing them again I realized that even though I complain and forget about everything that happens, there’s always Someone watching me. I don’t think about Him, I deny Him thousands of times, but He always gives me that thing that happened a few months before. I am the way I am, but I know that He watches me and laughs with tenderness. For the umpteenth time I feel looked at by Him in this way. Once the vacation is over, is everything else over? No, because what happened has given me back my desire, which is always with me: the desire that everything amaze me, and the desire to see how He accompanies me in my daily life, to notice the “miracle” that happens every day. Between songs that evening, someone talked about the desire to find the love for which one gives his or her whole life. I have found that love with GS. And it’s for this that a desire was reborn in me to live freely everywhere, even at home with my parents. I want a life united with others. What does it mean to feel loved? For me it means to feel that I’m accompanied in everything I do, and to be amazed, amazed to see that dinner is ready when I come home, to see my mother who always forgives me... the Italian songwriter Fabrizio De André loved even the ugly

things of his hometown Genoa: “Nothing grows out of diamonds, but out of dung the flowers grow.” I think about myself, how “small” I am, and I would like for flowers to grow. And there is someone who says to me: “Look, they are growing.”

Bianca, Bologna (Italy)

In dad’s room

I was expecting to accompany our dear parents in this last stretch of the road. I was prepared for it and I began with the greatest of motivations, the most solid reasons, but I discovered something more. It was this way with Mom and now it’s Dad’s turn. His illness has progressed very quickly, but it took away all his defenses and helped me discover like never before his great goodness, his kindness, and the love that enables him to give what is good without measure. I have discovered his incredible affection for my brother and me. Sometimes when I arrive at the nursing home, I call to him from a distance. Stooped over in his wheelchair, he raises his head and says, “Here I am,” but without seeing me. And when he does see me, he opens his eyes wide, and raising his arms, says, “Now I’m strong!” But his decline has been relentless and his spirit hides itself a little bit more every day, and it also seems that his interest in things is fading away. Often, I leave his room thinking that seeing him like that really isn’t good for me. Why do I come? He struggles to recognize me and if he does, he forgets everything within a few minutes. He has forgotten how to eat and do daily things. In his worst moments, he has a hard time opening his eyes and the few things he mumbles, if I can understand them, often make no sense. Tonight, it occurred to me what he and Mom had done with us, first when we were newborns, then when we began to use our freedom—first to separate from our parents, then to consciously err. They saw this—they were always there with a clear judgment but with respect for their children’s freedom; they would make a suggestion, give encouragement, and wait for us to flourish. After these thoughts, I returned to that room without my measuring stick. I stopped “knowing” and contemplated the mystery of gratuity, like when you hold your newborn child in your arms one night when he won’t stop crying, or when you look for and discretely cultivate that small crack through which your adolescent children allow you to enter. I am at peace because the meaning of all this does not depend on my abilities, but precedes me, is there first.

Gianandrea, Milan (Italy)



A space of encounter

Previously published in five languages, now *Disarming Beauty*, a collection of speeches and writings from Fr. Julián Carrón on Christianity's contribution to facing the challenges of our time (the financial crisis, terrorism, the situation in Europe, education...), has also come out in Arabic. It was translated at the request of Bibliotheca Alexandrina, which hosted a presentation of the book in December and made the text available on its website. Why? What did they find to be so useful for the



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Islamic world, at first glance so distant, and certainly different, from ours? We chose to let their own words, those of our hosts, answer—those of Wael Farouq, professor of Islamic studies and the heart and soul of the event, and those of the book’s translator, both Egyptian Muslims. What they recount helps us understand even more the value of the unexpected fact of the Arabic translation, and shows more clearly why we saw what the author of the book himself identifies as the most

pressing task in the somewhat violent confusion that surrounds all of us in our day: “Creating spaces in which, by listening and being open to the contributions others offer, we can walk away changed compared to when we walked in, despite our differences.” Spaces of encounter and dialogue, created to nurture those things that, as Fr. Giussani reminds us, we have in common with everyone, beyond any differences or ideologies: “The humanity of men and women,” our humanity. (dp) ■

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt, founded in the third century B.C., was the largest center for scholarship in the ancient world. The modern library was opened in 2002.

The seeds of a presence

Religion and the public square. Education and pluralism. Freedom, desire, good... The Arabic translation of Julián Carrón's *Disarming Beauty* was presented on December 26th at Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt. But what made it possible for the proposal of the book to reach the heart of the Islamic world? And what road does this event point out to us? One of the organizers tells us. Starting with a story that began long ago...

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Wael Farouq

photos by

J. Luis Rodríguez Torrego

I arrived in Alexandria with the book in hand, along with all that had been written about it in the newspapers. I was also carrying the hope that the ancient library of that historic city would grant our request to present the book there, together with a group of Egyptians who had embarked on a beautiful spiritual journey. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina was designed to look like the sun rising over the Mediterranean, and it truly is that: its value lies not so much in its glorious history, swallowed up centuries ago by the flames of ignorance and fanaticism, as from its capacity to instill new life into an historical heritage. With feet firmly rooted in the past and eyes looking to the future, it has become the beating heart of Egyptian culture, a space of freedom where one can pose questions and reason can seek courageous answers.

The security guard took me to the director's office, which was filled with visitors from Egypt and abroad. I sat down, waiting for my turn to enter. I was at the bottom of the list, seeing as I was neither a government official nor an ambassador, but merely a young university professor. After five hours, the secretary came to tell me that I would not be able to meet the director that day, and asked if I could come back the next week. I returned the next week, and the next, and every week for three consecutive months before I managed to meet with him. In the end, he agreed to let us use a room, not because he believed in the importance of the book, but thanks to the intercession of the library's staff, for whom I had acted as a courier between Cairo and Alexandria for three months...



That was 2006, and the book was *The Religious Sense* by Luigi Giussani. Following the presentation of that book, the attitude of the library's management changed radically. The book anticipated a discussion about the renewal of religious discourse. At the time, interreligious dialogue had lost much of its credibility—the Egyptians called it “kissing beards,” the beard of the imam and that of the priest, because it was purely a formal act in which the only encounter took place between beards, not between people.

Those who attended the presentation of *The Religious Sense* discovered that the coexistence of Islam and Christianity in Egypt was a question of identity, which had to do with the self, with rea-

son and reality, as well as the connection between tradition and the present moment. That was what most attracted readers. They were fascinated by the expository creativity Giussani employed in pinpointing two components of identity, each indispensable for the other; in fact, each nonexistent without the other. The first was the “material of identity,” meaning those traditions rooted in history and consolidated in the consciousness of contemporary man, which are daily put into practice in the form of mental categories and ways of being. The second was the “form of identity,” meaning the awareness generated in each person by the experience he has of reality, which is always unique and new—in other words, the per-

From right, Wael Farouq, Julián Carrón, and Marta Cartabia. Below, the cover of *Disarming Beauty* in Arabic.



“The Director of the Bibliotheca explained why he was so set on translating the book and inviting Carrón to present it: because it restores the thread, which had been broken, of fruitful exchanges across the Mediterranean. The book is just as interesting for ‘them’ as it is for ‘us.’ It is a kind of contemplation of oneself with one’s eyes focused on the other.”

son himself, in whom and through whom faith becomes flesh and bone. A few years later, Egypt went through a revolution that brought down many stereotypes. In Tahrir Square, the bodies of many Muslims became churches, a human chain carving out a space where Christians could celebrate the Mass. The bodies of Christians, in turn, became mosques where Muslims could pray. Tahrir Square was not a place of dialogue, but rather of witnesses to the faith of the people gathered there, who risked everything in the name of freedom. We were no longer speaking of dialogue, but of shared witness and prayer. Not long after, for the first time in history, the Egyptian president attended Christmas Mass, and Pope Francis came to visit Cairo, where he presided over the largest

Mass Egypt has ever seen. In the stadium where that Mass was held, there were Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, and Muslims praying together. By meeting with the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Pope Francis relived the meeting between St. Francis and Sultan al-Kamil.


After that visit, Mostafa El Feki, the director of Bibliotheca Alexandrina, launched an initiative in which every Egyptian school would study Pope Francis’s speech, and he came to the Rimini Meeting, saying that all Egyptians, Muslims, and Christians are sons and daughters of Christ. That atmosphere, that social reality, and that history invigorated El Feki, inspiring him to translate *Disarming Beauty*, Julián Carrón’s book, into Arabic and give away copies at the library, that it might reach all Arab readers. For the job, he chose the most talented and accomplished translator available, and the library insisted on assuming responsibility for the costs of translation, printing, and publication.

And so, there I was yet again on stage at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina to present another book to Arabic readers. This time, however, every door and every heart had been thrown wide open. On the morning of the event, December 26th, over 200 authors and intellectuals were gathered at the library to talk about religious discourse. At the end of the discussion, El Feki said that the true conclusion to our meetings would be that evening with the presentation on Carrón’s book, which he recommended that they all read. A number of intellectuals, some young and some



well-established, decided to stay, delaying their return to Cairo to be able to attend the event with Carrón. That evening, the hall was overflowing with people. Still ringing in their minds and hearts were those two days of discussions on the meaning of faith, its relationship to the public square, its place in society, and its role in education. The presentation began. The first to speak was Hussein Mahmoud, the translator and dean of the Faculty of Linguistics and Translation at Badr University of Cairo, BUC, a private university with about 10,000 students. He also translated Pope Benedict XVI's *Jesus of Nazareth* into Arabic. He recounted, "At first, I said no to translating the book. Then, one evening, out of curiosity, I started flipping through it. I sensed that it responded to many questions that directly affect the Arab-Islamic culture and that it, without preaching too much, touched on many sore points, even offering appropriate remedies. So I rushed to call the library to tell them that I would like to translate it." Mahmoud went on, summarizing the points that struck him, until he was interrupted by the enthusiastic entrance of El Feki. He had regretfully turned down participation in the event because he had to take the President of the Republic on a tour in Alexandria to inaugurate a few projects.

As soon as the tour was over, however, he rushed back to the library. He came into the room, walked onto the stage, and stated his regrets that the visit with the president caused him to miss out. Then

 The audience before the event at Bibliotheca Alexandrina.



■
Julián Carrón with Wael Farouq.

he corrected himself, laughing, “It seems like my desire to meet Carrón could cost me my job!” And the room broke out in laughter with him. El Feki explained why he was so set on translating the book and inviting Carrón to present it: because it restores the thread, which had been broken, of fruitful exchanges across the Mediterranean. The book is just as interesting for “them” as it is for “us.” It is a kind of contemplation of oneself with one’s eyes focused on the other.

At that point, El Feki’s gaze landed on the legal scholar Muftid Shehab, former Minister of Higher Education and leader of the legal team that negotiated the return of the city of Taba to Egypt after the Israeli occupa-

tion of Sinai ended. He asked me—since I was the moderator for the evening—if we could pass him the microphone to say some words of welcome to Carrón. Professor Shehab described how happy he was with the presence of the distinguished Italian delegation, which reawakened his nostalgia for the years he spent in Rome studying art. “I did not read the book, but what I have heard about what is written in it has convinced me that one of the causes behind the crisis in religious discourse is how we close in on ourselves. Extremism and terrorism did not exist when college students went to study in Europe and European professors came to teach in our universities. I hope that tradition can be reestablished. Though it may

“Dialogue is no longer a search for points of contact. It is no longer a formal dialogue, but rather presence. In every form it takes, a presence generates hope.”

be difficult to send Egyptian students abroad right now, there is no problem for Italian professors who would like to come to Egypt. Despite the fact that I am nearing 80 years old, I am ready to volunteer to work on any project that could broaden the horizons of our Egyptian young people.” The microphone then passed to Professor Salah Fadl, one of the fathers of Egyptian modernity and the best-known Arabic-language commentator on Dante Alighieri. Fadl was seated in the audience, and they gave him the floor as those on stage sat listening. The professor said that the title of the book and the brief meeting he had with Carrón before the presentation opened his eyes to what might be the answer to the crisis in Islamic religious discourse. “It is a solution that has always been right in front of our eyes, but we have never paid attention. It was necessary for Carrón to cross the Mediterranean to show us that the solution is beauty.” He then began to enumerate all the ways beauty is manifested through religious and cultural practices and is a foundation upon which a new discourse can be built. Focus moved back from the audience to the stage, from the beauty of tradition and language to the beauty of the law. Marta

Cartabia, the vice-president of the Italian Constitutional Court, took us to those places in pluralistic societies that do not require anyone to give up beauty or freedom for the sake of the public interest, because the laws that regulate that public interest must be beautiful in order to be just. Or, to put it another way, they are just because they are beautiful.

The key words in the book are encounter and freedom, and both are impossible without beauty. Cartabia charmed her listeners and made you think it perhaps downright necessary that a person of the law also be a poet, because, within ordinary things, he or she must discern aspects that other people cannot.

Two and a half hours into the presentation, Carrón still had not spoken. I imagine he had never participated in such a chaotic event, with such blurred boundaries between the stage and the audience. It seemed more like a public demonstration than a conference, but a demonstration of love. Perhaps he had this same perception, as he concluded by saying, “It seems to me that nothing could better express what I attempted to say in the book than what we have seen this evening. We need to create spaces in which, by listening and being open to the contributions of others, we can walk away different compared to when we entered. And do so despite all of our differences, which often make us think that it would be impossible.”

Our concept of dialogue underwent a deep transformation. Carrón’s book and the story of how it came to be translated in Arabic were important steps toward that change. Dialogue is no longer a form of negotiation to reach a compromise. It is no longer a search for points of contact or an overlooking of differences. It is no longer a formal dialogue, but rather presence. In every form it takes, a presence generates hope. One does not have to be powerful nor an intellectual, but simply, as we are able, the best we can be. It is a presence that awakens the desire for good and for beauty, a witness that opens the way for encounter, and a gaze that helps a person discover himself... These are new words for a new phase, a new experience of interacting with reality, one in which misunderstandings dissipate and stereotypes are dismantled, in which we free ourselves and others from preconceptions. It is a continual celebration of life.

It was an important gesture. After the presentation in Alexandria, it is likely others will follow, but in the meantime, we are getting ready to celebrate Pope Francis’s visit to the United Arab Emirates. A presence scatters seeds without knowing in which hearts they will flower, but with the certainty that they will bear fruit. ■



What we have in common



Luigi Giussani

“The ‘other’ is essential for my existence to develop, for my vigor and life. Dialogue is this relationship with the ‘other,’ whoever and however he or she may be.” A passage from one of the first works by the founder of CL.

The presentation of *The Religious Sense* by Fr. Giussani at the UN building in New York in 1997. The founder of CL described that event as “a new beginning. An unforeseeable fact. It is God who makes everything out of nothing.”

“Newness always comes from an encounter with the other. It is the rule with which life is born: we exist because others have given us life.”

The instrument of co-existence with the whole of human reality made by God is dialogue. So dialogue is the instrument of *mission*.

If we were to be totally cut off from the world, from others, alone, absolutely alone, we would not find any novelty. Newness always comes from an encounter with the other. It is the rule with which life is born: we exist because others have given us life. A seed left on its own does not grow; but placed in a setting where it can be nurtured by something else, it opens up. The “other” is essential for my existence to develop, for my vigor and life. Dialogue is this relationship with the “other,” whoever and however he or she may be.

What does the other bring? Certainly, always a sphere of interest, which as such is partial, but in the network of ordered relationships helps to bring about a harmonious maturity, a completeness. Each one of us, because of one’s particular temperament, tends to stress certain things; contact with others reminds one of other things and of other aspects of the same thing. Dialogue is thus a function of those horizons of universality and totality to which man is destined. Let us remember therefore the important function of dialogue for the Church’s Catholicity.

Unlimited openness, which is appropriate to dialogue as the factor that makes a person evolve and creates a new society, has one serious prerequisite: it is never true dialogue unless one is truly aware of oneself. In other words, it is dialogue only if it is lived as a comparison of the other’s proposal with one’s own proposal; it is dialogue only insofar as one has a mature awareness of oneself. So if the “crisis,” in the sense of being challenged to re-evaluate one’s own tradition, does not logically precede the dialogue with the other, then either one will remain

blocked by the other’s influence or the other, whom one rejects, will provoke an irrational hardening of one’s own position. Therefore dialogue implies an opening towards the other, whoever it is—because everyone witnesses an interest or an aspect that one may have set aside, and therefore anyone at all provokes one to an ever more complete comparison—but dialogue also implies a maturity, a critical awareness of oneself.

If we do not keep this in mind then a great danger emerges, that of *mistaking compromise for dialogue*. To take what we have in common with the other as a starting point does not at all mean saying the same thing, even if we use the same words: what is justice for another is not justice for a Christian, what is freedom for another is not freedom for a Christian; education in someone else’s conception is not education as the Church conceives it. To borrow a term from scholastic philosophy, our words have a different “form”; we have a different form in our way of perceiving, feeling, and tackling things. What we have in common with the other is to be sought not so much in ideology as in the other’s native structure, in those human needs, in those original criteria, in which he or she is human like us. Openness to dialogue, therefore, means the ability to take as a starting point those problems to which the other’s ideology or our Christianity proposes solutions, because what is common to different ideologies is the humanity of the men and women who carry those ideologies as banners of hope or as an answer.

(Excerpt from *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press 2006, pp. 131-132). ■

“We can begin here”



Luca Fiore

He translated *Disarming Beauty* into Arabic, after having turned the job down because religion is not his “field.” He changed his mind once he started to read the book, because “the rediscovery of true reason” is crucial for an Islamic world in crisis.

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“Don’t think that our worlds are so far apart. Our societies are quite familiar with the Christianity that, in the final analysis, was born in our lands and only later spread throughout Europe.” Right away, Hussein Mahmoud clears the field of any possible misconceptions: all that separates us is a few kilometers of water, and we are united by centuries of religious, cultural, and economic relationships.

A journalist, author, translator, and the director of the Department of Italian Language at Helwan University in Cairo, Mahmoud is also the dean of the School of Linguistics and Translation at Badr University in Cairo, BUC. He is the Arabic translator of Fr. Julián Carrón’s *Disarming Beauty*, which was presented at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt on December 26th.

How did you come to your decision to translate *Disarming Beauty*?

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina asked me to do so. The religious themes are not within my field of interest or study, so originally I responded negatively. They sent me the book anyway, and I started to read it. At the end of the first chapter, I changed my mind and decided to take the job.

Why?

He addresses many of the big issues of our time. I think that, in the situation in which we find ourselves, such an approach is very useful. What we are going through is not just an economic crisis; it is a crisis of “faith.” Not so much faith in God, but faith in the daily things of life.

Can you help me understand that better?

In the first chapter, Fr. Carrón explains how the root of today’s crisis is the way Enlightenment thinkers began to conceive of the individual and his freedom. He shows how the uneasiness we experience today is not just the fruit of economic circumstances, but of something that has broken down in us. And in that sense, Islam is in crisis just as much as Christianity is. International terrorism is an expression of this difficulty: it reflects the uneasiness contemporary man is trying

to address without, however, being able to explore the true depths of its origin. European thinkers who, after World War I, tried to address the existential crisis of modern man did not have the courage to take religion into consideration. Yet the Greek and Roman cultures had done so long ago, beginning with Plato and Aristotle’s *De Anima*. The classical world sought to explain natural phenomena from a metaphysical perspective. This book, in a certain sense, does the same by including the religious dimension in its scope. Especially because, for Carrón, Christianity cannot be reduced to a system of ethics or morality, but is rather a witness within the reality of life. Faith, therefore, has to do with everything.

How do you think this approach could be useful for Egyptian society?

The entire Islamic world is in need of renewal. Our president, Al Sisi, expressed this well: we need to renew a religious discourse. And, in my opinion, this is a process that could begin here: by reconciling religion, philosophy, and science. It is as if we have gone back to the time



Hussein Mahmoud.

of Averroës, the Muslim philosopher who lived in the 12th century, who used Aristotle to renew Islamic thought. Then, like today, Islamic theologians were attacking philosophy, which was an expression of the use of reason. In his book, Carrón proposes a re-discovery of true reason. He reopens the debate that has continued throughout human history.

And is that the crisis in Islam you were speaking about?

This is the point: there is no “correct” version of Islam. There are only varying interpretations. Some of these instrumentalize religion to achieve ends that are far from the spirit behind the religion’s existence. This takes place through a dogmatic interpretation of some aspects of the Koran. In the end, there is no longer a relationship between faith and reason, and Islamic theology is unable to dialogue with the contemporary world, with the problems we see in life today.

You said, “a rediscovery of true reason.” In what sense do you think it needs to be rediscovered?

It seems to me this need is evident from just looking at the international situation, the way people conceive of relationships among nations. Just think of American politics in the Middle East, or the way people think of the relationship between advanced countries and economically underdeveloped ones. It seems like these issues are addressed in an incomplete way. We need to restore the true value of reason in the lives of people and societies. This is a very broad issue, and the value of this book is precisely that it broadens our

horizons again, helping us understand the scope of the problem. It has the merit of putting into question things we thought we already understood.

What difficulties did you encounter as a translator?

The most complicated part of the work was going back to find the texts of authors cited, for example Shakespeare, and translating them from the original. Then there was the interesting case of the word “communion,” which I started out translating with the equivalent of “Eucharist.” Wael Farouq helped me with this, suggesting that I use an Arabic term that has more of a, let’s say, “cultural” connotation.

What was your impression of the title *Disarming Beauty*?

It is a beautiful title, really fascinating. In a way, it implies that beauty *has been disarmed*. There was a time when that was not the case. But beauty cannot be otherwise because it is without weapons. The idea is that the presence of faith in your life must be peaceful, because faith, like all positive human values, cannot be violent. Carrón proposes an innocent, pure, serene, and tranquil faith.

Carrón also declares that “the only way to truth is through freedom.”

Yes, you cannot impose a set of values on men and women because these are generated from within a person. This is related to the dynamic of education, as he explains in depth.

Faced with the current difficulties between our two worlds, some would say that dialogue is the only way forward.

Of course, but the door has already been opened and we need to be careful not to let it close. The ties between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean have never been severed, going back to ancient times. I mean the dialogue between persons, not institutions. Presenting a book like this is normal. And it is important that it be available on the shelves of Egyptian bookstores. Because even in a climate as strained as the one we live in, if ideas have wings, they begin to fly. ■



*“These are
people I want
to be with”*



Paola Bergamini
photos by
Massimo Quattrucci

We take you on a journey to a high school on the outskirts of Rome, where a question thrown out at an assembly—“Why do you come to school?”—overturned the routine. Here, in encounter after encounter, Christianity is being born, pure and simple.



In these pages, the GS kids from the Amaldi High School in Rome.

In October 2018, in the Edoardo Amaldi High School for science and languages, in Tor Bella Monaca, an area south of Rome (infamous because of the Casamonica mafia clan), student elections were in full swing. There were four parties running, and one of the candidates was Federico Giorgetti, known to everyone as “Gio,” a fourth-year student in the languages program [Italian high schools require five years of study]. A trusted friend, Alfiero, had asked him to run, but this was not the only reason he decided to be a candidate. When he went into the classrooms to campaign, he said, “Up until last year, I lived passively. Nothing mattered to me, including school. I was quiet in class and didn’t bother anybody. In the end, I even let myself fail a year. But last summer I went to the GS vacation and something happened that blew me away, in a good sense. I saw that there is hope. Yes, a hope that is not some vague wish for a better future, but something

good in the things I do. I’ve had painful and difficult things happen to me like you have, but now I don’t see them as a sentence, something to be forgotten. Now everything interests me. This same thing, this ‘good’ that I have seen, is what I desire for the school.” The two thousand students of the Amaldi High School remained silent. As he listened, Federico, a senior, thought, “I’m going to vote for this guy. The others are campaigning for clean grounds and a café in the school, but he’s talking about himself, what he desires out of life.”

“The good,” “hope,” “something that happens.” We have heard these words before, and maybe take them for granted, but looking at the faces of these students as they say them, you understand that they are signs of a newness that has burst into their lives. They have within them that *more* of Christianity, “the unforeseen and unpredictable” that Fr. Giussani spoke about at the Beginning Day, full and simple, that can be looked at and recounted.

Federico’s party was called “Reality exceeds the idea” and the objectives of his platform were “1. Improving the relationship between the school and the student; 2. A forum on cinema and school parties; and 3. ?” That’s right, just a question mark. Asked whether this was a mistake, Gio answered, “We’re open to all proposals and ideas from students.” His party won two of four positions in the election. Winning together with Gio was Marco, who was not a follower of the GS experience, but agreed with his platform.

The first school assembly organized by Gio took place on November 22nd. The agenda for the day included the question, “Why do you attend Amaldi?” There were more than two hundred students in the meeting hall, many more than normal. The first to speak expressed discontent, saying “I attend because I want a diploma,” and “my parents force me to go,” and so on. Viviana, seated in the first row, was seething. She got up, went to the microphone, and said, “If you die a year from now, and thus haven’t gotten your degree or achieved the success you wanted, will everything you have done

been useless? Why come to school? I come because now, and I emphasize now, there is an opportunity for something good for me. I'm not interested in promises for the future. I want to live now. You can think of it the way you want, but for me, this is how it is." Somebody laughed and commented, "Hey, all this talk about death is bad luck, knock it off," but the tone in the room changed. Students got up to talk about themselves, their families, a painful experience, a glimpse of hope. At a certain point, Alfiero got up and said, "Viviana is right. Change is possible. I used to drink and smoke pot, and failed a year. Then Marina, my philosophy teacher, invited me to a GS vacation. I didn't even know what this GS thing was, and I just went with the idea of having fun. I brought a suitcase full of bottles of gin, and so I had fun my way. But the last day during the hike in the mountains, I thought, 'I'm not going to stop here; it's not enough. I want to continue going up.' Something happened there, something came to me, and a change began. I stayed with these friends and went to the Easter Triduum. A gift was given to my life, to me, someone who considered himself a loser. I'm not any better than anyone else—it's just that I have been saved." For Lorenzo, this was the first assembly he had attended in six years, because he liked what was on the agen-

da. He got up to speak after Alfiero. "I don't know whether there's something good for me at Amaldi, but there's one thing I'm certain about: here inside these four walls, my brother encountered GS, that is, something happened that has made him happy. School hasn't changed but it has become beautiful." At the end of the assembly, Gio invited everyone to an outing to the Tor Vergata fields.

That afternoon, Camilla found Alfiero's number on a social network and called him. He said, "Come to a meeting tomorrow." She went, even though she didn't know anyone. There were many things she did not understand, but she was struck by the seriousness and attention of the people there. She returned every week after that.

The vacations, the election campaign, the assembly, the study afternoons, have been signs of this newness breaking through. Cinetta, who has been teaching Italian at the school for 20 years, and together with Marina follows the GS community, finds herself looking at this new fact. She says, "There has always been a little group, but now it's something absolutely new for us, as well, and not because of the numbers. These kids often have difficult family situations and live in an area where drug dealing and violence are the norm. This friendship is not a 'good alter-

native' to other things: it is what gives substance to life." They can't help but tell everybody; it has a public dimension. "At times we learn secondhand about initiatives they've taken at school. We discover it from the kids who arrive for the 'raggio' meeting, or in the morning when there are new faces when we pray the Angelus together before going into school. Some don't know what CL or GS are. In some ways I feel I'm reliving my early days in the Movement. I use their words: something that is happening now. One thing is certain: nothing will stop them."

This could be seen in what happened with the study help center. In June 2018, the municipality revoked its permission to use the two spaces near school that the GS group had been using for years. Those two rooms had become their second home. What should they do? They took action and began meeting in each other's houses. In December, when school was closed for four days, they met in Lorenzo's house. Each room was for a different subject. "For me, those days were a revolution," recounts Ilaria. "I'd never studied so seriously, enjoying every subject. Even math, which I hate, was interesting."

At the beginning of the academic year, they got the principal's permission to use a classroom for study help and "extracurricular activities," that is, the "raggio" meet-



“That group of kids asked the same questions I have always asked myself. Until that moment, I had always held those questions in, because my friends thought I was crazy...”

ing. One Friday afternoon, Lisa and Danila, who had arrived early for tutoring, saw a small group of students outside the school surrounding Cinetta, their Humanities teacher. Curious, they approached a blond girl and asked, “What are you here for?” “Come in and see.” They forgot about their studies and went. “I was shocked,” recounts Lisa. “I found people who were attentive, who listened without judging. GS is fantastic.”



Since then, they have never left. After an assembly with all the communities of the Lazio region, Danila wrote to Fr. Pigi Banna, who accompanies the experience of GS. “That group of kids asked the same questions I have always asked myself. Until that moment, I had always held those questions in, because my friends thought I was crazy. But that day I found people who could understand me. My friends at the time were classic examples of those who were born and who will die on the sidelines. I thought this would be my world, but I knew that this was not living, this was not my path. I have never confided in anyone because I don’t want pity or compassion. But in GS I found kids who are interested in what I think and who can help me find the answers I haven’t found yet. I can’t wait to go forward and answer as many questions as possible, and also to ask new ones.”

The blond girl who had said “come in and see” was Alexandra. Two years ago, she became Alfiero’s girlfriend. “He told me about that vacation and that hike. The more I asked him to explain, the less I understood.” Finally, he told her to go see Cinetta. When Alexandra asked the teacher about what had happened to Alfiero, Cinetta responded, “Come to the Triduum.” Alexandra recounts, “I went, and understood very little, nothing, actually, but there was something. Something for me. I have never left.” Returning from that Triduum, Lorenzo told Ilenia that at a certain point during that period he and Alfiero had cried. She knew them well, and they were not the type to cry easily. Those days must have been

“There’s nothing special about us. But there is a striving, a desire, that makes everything become interesting.”

very intense. “I looked at them and thought that I wanted the same light that shone in their eyes. I began to attend the meetings, to pray the Angelus, to study with them, to joke around: to live. Finally I was myself. I was free in a way I had never experienced before. They are the biggest gift in my life.”

Italian is one of Stefania’s favorite subjects. Even Greek mythology, when Cinetta explains it, is pertinent to life. Stefania is fascinated by this teacher, who one day invited her to the birthday party for Marta, a girl in GS. Though Stefania did not know anyone, she trusted Cinetta and went. “They got to talking about things I didn’t understand at all,” she recalls. “I only thought, these are people I want to be with. The thing that amazes me is that there’s nothing special about us. We’re like everyone else, at times kind of jerks actually, but there is a striving,

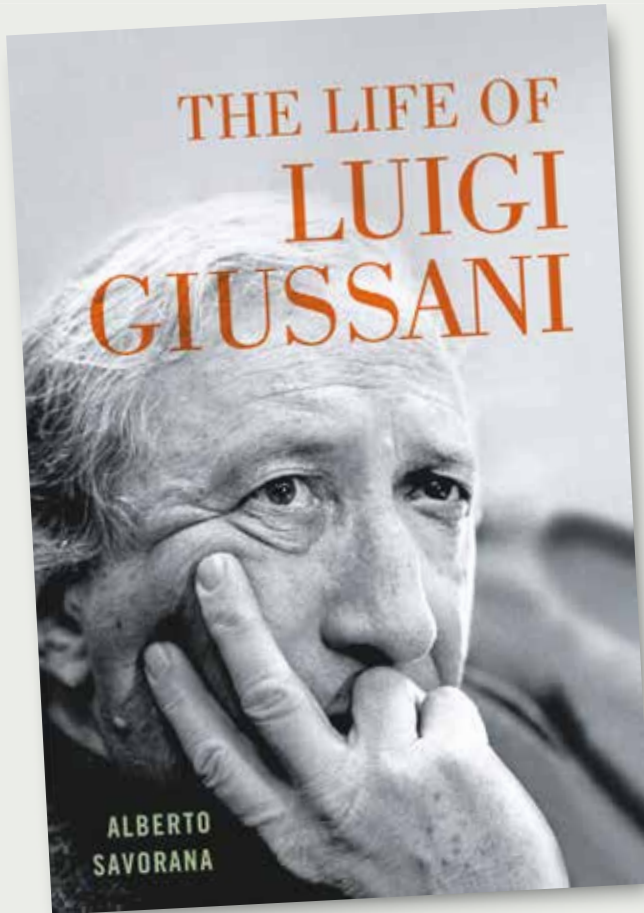
a desire, that makes everything become interesting, and life changes.” Stefania’s mother noticed this change, and in discussions in which Stefania tried unsuccessfully to explain it, they ended up quarrelling. Finally, in January, Stefania insisted that her mother accompany her to the assembly with Fr. Pigi. The next day, her mother said, “You have something beautiful there. Everybody should have something like that.”

Alessandro’s mother, too, noted that this “thing” made her son different. “Now, If I tell her I’m going out with these friends, she doesn’t grill me about it.” He failed his second year of high school, something that had come as no surprise. The surprise, instead, was Cinetta’s invitation to the GS vacation. A vacation after failing the year? When Alessandro expressed his reluctance to ask his mother for the money, Alfiero told him, “I know what you’re going through, because it happened to me, too. This is why I want you to come to GS.” At the first meeting, he knew practically no one. “I went in and discovered that they had saved a place for me. I was really struck by this.” But the true discovery was listening to the questions the kids asked. “These were the same questions I had and was trying to answer on my own without success.” And since then, Alessandro has never left either. ■



THE LIFE OF LUIGI GIUSSANI

by Alberto Savorana. Translated by Chris Bacich and Mariangela Sullivan



A detailed account of the life and legacy of the founder of the Communion and Liberation movement.

1,416 Pages, December 2017

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